

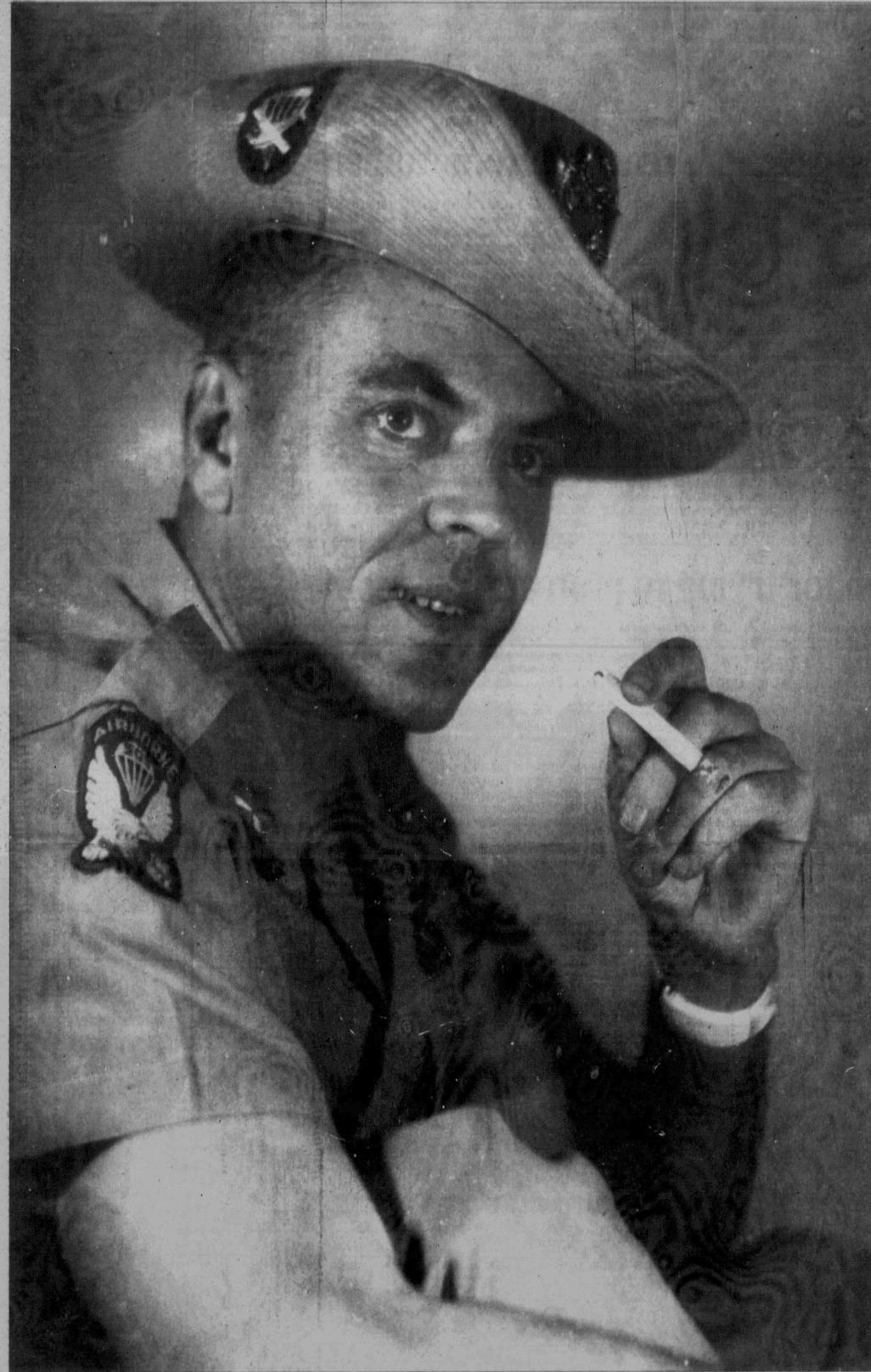
FYI

FOR YOUR INFORMATION

■ **Casual and colorful**
describe the art gallery
wear in KC. **Look, Page 5 ►**

■ **Creativity:** Is it an issue
of nature vs. nurture?
Person to Person, Page 3

www.kcstar.com/fyi/fyi.htm



Lucien Conein was a key figure in many covert U.S. operations the last 50 years.

Conein . . . Lucien Conein

**Who was he?
Only the best secret
agent we know of
to come out of
Kansas City, Kan.**

By JAMES A. FUSSELL
Staff Writer

He was straight out of a John le Carre novel, all trench coats and piano wires, a swashbuckling soldier of fortune whose real life was as wild as anything Hollywood could concoct.

When he died this summer at age 79 in McLean, Va., he received a 21-gun salute and a full military funeral at Arlington National Cemetery. His name was Lucien Conein, and as far as anyone can tell, he was the only "secret agent" ever to come out of Kansas City, Kan.

Decorated by four countries, he parachuted behind German lines, supervised U.S. agents behind the Iron Curtain and once — so the story goes — smuggled arms into Vietnam in coffins. He carried a pearl-handled revolver, spoke French as well as English, and could move seamlessly between ruffians and royalty.

An inventive and enthusiastic storyteller, Conein lived a life that never left him wanting for material. He worked for the OSS (the wartime spy service), the CIA, the Drug Enforcement Administration, married three times, fathered seven children and was even recruited by E. Howard Hunt to be one of the Watergate burglars. (He turned down Hunt and later boasted, "If I had been involved, we would have done it right.")

The obituary supplied by his family to *The Kansas City Star* read simply: "Col. Lucien E. Conein, 79 . . . passed away June 3rd."

The New York Times had more to say. Conein, it wrote, was "one of the last of the great Cold War spies, whose swashbuckling tales of war and death and sex, almost all of them true, form an enduring legend at the CIA."

Stanley Lind of Lenexa was a classmate of



Conein was a student at Wyandotte High when this photo was taken in 1937.

Photos courtesy of Pete and Betty Buckley

See SPY G-8, Col. 1

SPY

Continued from G-1

Conein's President of the Wyandotte High School class of 1938, which held its 60th high school reunion last week in Overland Park, Lind said many in the class remembered Conein well.

"When you have a student who comes over from France he tends to stick out like a sore thumb," he said.

In fact, almost all of Conein's life stuck out.

Upon hearing of Conein's exploits, high school classmate Vernon Dixon of Spokane, Wash., echoed the repeated sentiment.

"I wish I had paid more attention to him."

Ross Roach of Overland Park was one of Conein's best friends in high school. Roach said the two talked at length about the war and fighting the Germans.

They also talked about being spies.

"That was just the literature we read as teen-agers," Roach said. "Adventure stories, *Fu Manchu* stories, *Charlie Chan* movies."

"But unlike Roach, Conein was serious."

Although Conein was not born in Kansas, he always considered it home.

"My father always wanted to retire in Kansas," said Lauren Conein, one Conein's six sons. "He loved Kansas."

Conein also is survived by his wife, Elyette, a daughter, 11 grandchildren and one great-grandchild.

It was in Kansas, during the Depression, that Conein learned about hardship, loyalty and patriotism. And it was there that he acquired a love of guns developed his fascination with the military and learning to code. He had the charm and rough good looks to his advantage by getting girls to do his homework for him.

Born in Paris in 1919, Conein was 5 when he lost his father to an automobile accident. His mother, unable to support him, put him in an orphanage. A doctor once told her he would be if he wasn't moved to a different environment.

So it was that in 1924 his mother sent him to Kansas City, Kan., to live with his aunt Lilly McBee, a French war bride.

In the late '30s he attended Wyandotte High School before dropping out. Soon after he joined the French army when WWII broke out in 1939. After fighting for several years, he returned to the States, became an American citizen and joined the U.S. Army.

Conein participated in his share of heady wartime intrigues, espionage, secret operations and various feats of derring-do. Stories of his exploits are legendary — some are true, some are partly true, others clearly are not.

Conein himself sometimes cautions listeners of his stories with the admonition: "Don't believe anything I tell you; I'm an expert at that."

Historian Stanley Karnow likened Conein to Somerset Maugham's fictional spy Ashenden, who repeated his cover stories so often he had trouble separating fact from fiction.

His wife, Elyette Conein of McLean, Va., Conein valued honesty more than anything but had no choice but to lie at times.

"Do you think he was going to tell you everything?" she said. "He was not. He was a spy."

But these stories, all who knew him agree, are true.

In 1954, during the Vietnam War, Conein was the liaison through which Henry Cabot Lodge passed approval for a coup against South Vietnamese President Ngo Dinh Diem. Conein thought Diem would be deposed and exiled. Instead he was assassinated.

Karnow, who talked extensively with Conein, said that infuriated the spy.

"When they brought the bodies back he goes to the chief of the junta and says: 'You (expel) deleted! What are you going to say now?' Karnow says. "And the junta chief said, 'I'll just say they committed suicide.' And Lou (Conein) replies and says: 'You (expel) deleted! They're Catholics. They wouldn't have committed suicide.'

After the United States dropped atomic bombs on Japan in 1945, Japan prepared to surrender. Conein was part of the team where Japan still held the upper hand. Japanese soldiers were not about to surrender to their prisoners. Conein was part of a joint French and U.S. mission that sent officials to accept the Japanese surrender in Vietnam.

His mission: to parachute into the city of Hanoi in advance of the plane's landing. His wife remembers the story.

"When he landed he was surrounded by Japanese with machine guns," she said. "But they didn't shoot. When he knew the Japanese were not going to shoot him, he sent a flare up and the plane landed."

"But you have to understand. He could have been jumping to his death! And he just went. That's the way he was. He loved his country, and he risked his life for it many times. It was a war, and he was daring."

He was also a character. Talk to anyone about Lou Conein and

He could be just as crude as the worst redneck you could find. Or he could be charming, self-effacing and condescending and talk with royalty. But when he recruited someone to do whatever he needed to have done, he was honest and up-front with them.

— retired Major Gen. Victor Hugo

you'll come away with at least one of his stories.

Like the time in high school when he and his friend Marvin Krizler borrowed a car from Marvin's father, who owned a local car dealership.

"Marvin should come in and say, 'Dad, could I have a car?'" Elyette Conein said. "He said, 'OK, but you can't drive more than 20 miles.' And then the father would write down the mileage. But then Lou found out that if they drove backward the mileage would not register. So they just drove all the way to Kansas City, Kan., backward."

Pete Buckley of Kansas City grew up with Conein on Freeman Avenue. Conein even spent a couple of years living with Buckley's parents after leaving home to go out on his own.

Buckley particularly remembered a time when Conein visited him and his wife, Betty, in Corpus Christi, Texas.

During his visit a local liquor store chain ran a special on Canadian Club, a whiskey not easy to get during WWII. Conein was the store's regular customer. "Buckley remembered, "So my wife, Lucien and some of my friends went to all the stores and bought the booze and brought it back (for Lucien) and loaded it in his suitcase and dragged it across the floor of the airport terminal. He took the liquor to Washington,

D.C., with him and we shipped his clothes!"

On the same trip Betty Buckley remembers seeing Conein gazing at himself in a mirror, pounding on his chest and saying in a loud voice, "You are the best looking son of a (guinea) in the world!" then singing a series of French songs in an uncomfortably loud voice.

"I thought he was going to get us kicked out," she said.

If Conein was anything, friends said, he was unpredictable.

And generous.

"He once moved into our apartment and took off his Army jacket and had a shoulder holster with a .32 Colt automatic," Pete Buckley recalled. "I commented on it and he gave it to me!" Later at a party a "fellow commented on his (German officer's) belt. And he took it off and gave it to him. He was just a super, super person."

Not to mention a super spy.

"He could be just as crude as the worst redneck you could find," said retired Major Gen. Victor Hugo.

"Or he could be charming, self-effacing and condescending and talk with royalty. But when he recruited someone to do whatever he needed to have done, he was honest and up-front with them."

What would he need to have done?

Hugo paused.

"I can't tell you that," he said.

FRIENDS

Continued from G-1

in Jamaica.

Just as touching as the love story is the friendship between Stella (Angela Bassett) and her best friend, Delilah (Whoopi Goldberg), who bond, joke and do all sorts of things together in the movie — from encouraging each other to exercise and eat healthy, to hooking up with some beach bums, swapping clothes and giggling until their eyes tear.

Perhaps most moving, though, is the scene in which Stella eulogizes her best friend, who dies of cancer.

"Who," Stella asks at her friend's memorial, "is going to be your best friend now?"

"Stella" producer Deb Schindler said Delilah is the movie's "comic foil" — which also Stella's conscience — much like any girlfriend would be. "She allows Stella to express all her hysterics, her anxieties, and her fears and her truths," Schindler said.

"She can stand next to her girlfriend and say anything and know that even if they disagree, she won't go to her and say 'against her.'

McMillan met Stella after she met her real-life boyfriend in Jamaica in 1996.

"It's always there, what she and I did together," McMillan said.

"I just basically tried to capture her aura — you know — what I knew she would say ... under these circumstances, sometimes I would think of what my girlfriend would say and I'd just crack up."

"There are certain moments that remind me. I forgot that I wrote the words to the sly song Stella gives to Delilah, and I've realized that I wrote that for my girlfriend," McMillan said. "She happens to also be her younger

BEST AVAILABLE COPY

You know she's a *true* girlfriend if she . . .

No — there is no one on this Earth who will more willingly put her neck on your chopping block for you quicker than your girlfriend, if she's truly your girlfriend. Here are 10 sure-fire ways to tell if she's a true friend, as told in *Christina Coleman's Just Between Friends* (Simon & Schuster, \$17.95).

■ She'll be the UPS man drop off your QVC purchases at her house to prevent your man from pitching a fit.

■ She will say your outfit is too tight, too ugly or too much when you thought it was stunning.

■ She willlessly slip you a mint when you're having a bad breath day.

■ She would never, ever sleep with your man (or your ex, for that matter) even if he had the body of an NFL linebacker or were as fine as Denzel.

■ She attends your child's annual spring concert every year, though you son can't sing.

■ She will whip up a tasty meal for you and your date because you bid him cook.

■ She coigns your lies and swears it's the truth, though there are lies in your story.

■ She will help you cheat on your diet, then make sure you run an extra lap.

■ She promises that you will also be a millionaire when she hits the lottery.

■ She lets you take your frustrations out on her and then she forgives you.

— *New York Daily News*

was a wonderful person."

And men? No matter how hard they try, they'll never understand.

They could ponder it a bit, consider what their best friends mean to them — but they'll never get girlfriend pearls, lie talking to her on the phone for two hours after having just dipped her bacon home from a daylong shopping spree.

Edwina Osborn of the Bronx, says it's simply "a woman thing."

"We are compassionate and sensitive, and we're not afraid to put our feelings or our shoulder," said Osborn, whose best friend happens to also be her younger

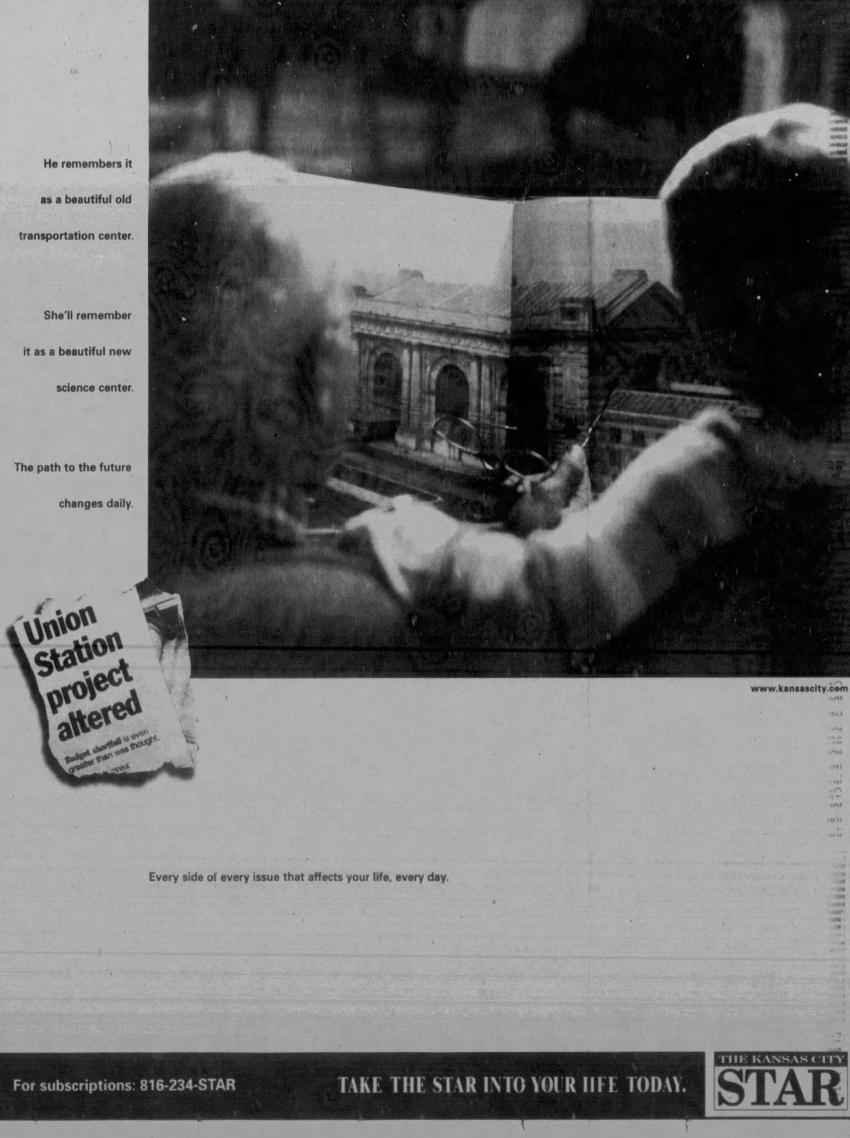
sister, Beverly Frazier-Walker. "The first place we learn to feel all of that is our girlfriend."

And life without best friends, said Brenda Regester, of Brooklyn, would be "empty."

"Men come and go, but there is some special something when it comes to girlfriends," said Regester, who counts Trudy, Jacqueline and Nila as her best friends.

"It's an ingredient that you can hardly explain. We all go through thick and thin; we've all gone through marriage, divorces, marriage again and again and we understand."

"They are my saviors, and I'm sure I'm their savior."



For subscriptions: 816-234-STAR

TAKE THE STAR INTO YOUR LIFE TODAY.

THE KANSAS CITY

STAR